

January 5, 2007 - Slaughter: Democracy is the Art of Compromise, Not of Coercion

Slaughter: Democracy is the Art of Compromise, Not of Coercion

January 5, 2007

Mr. Speaker,

Today we are taking up the third title of the new Democratic Rules Package which will restore civility to this body.

The House was always intended to be a place where civil discourse and the courteous exchange of ideas would be the normal state of affairs.

But referring to this portion of our Rules Package as the "Civility" title is actually a civil term for what we are talking about: the restoration of democracy itself to this House.

Over the last several years, parliamentary procedure has broken down here.

The standard practices of this body, carefully designed Rules that are fundamental to our democratic process, have fallen by the wayside. Far too often, they have been shunned and ignored whenever doing so fit the needs of the former Majority.

At the end of 2003, the House took up a Medicare Prescription Drug Bill. It is an example of the broken legislation produced by a broken process.

Instead of proceeding in an open and transparent manner, conference discussions were held behind closed doors for months. On one occasion, Democratic conferees Charlie Rangel and Marion Berry - men who have spent their lives and careers fighting for the good of this nation were not let into the conference room. They were physically prevented from coming inside.

That abusive secrecy was for good reason: the bill being written was bad for the country, and Republican conferees didn't want anybody to find out about it. But one group that did learn of its dangerous provisions was the Republican conference - and when the bill was brought to the floor on November 21, a significant number of principled Republicans refused to vote for it.

And so, once again, civil and democratic procedure were denied. The Republican leadership had lost the vote after the standard time allotted - so they kept it open.

That vote, scheduled for 15 minutes, went on for three hours. For three hours, deals were made, arms were twisted, and our democracy was shamed.

In the end, the bill passed.

Or consider what occurred when this Congress sought to respond to the threat posed by avian bird flu.

Two years ago, conferees on the Defense Appropriations bill tried to supply funds for anti-flu vaccines. The conference report was signed by conferees on December 18, 2005.

But before it came to the Rules Committee, the bill was changed.

A blanket liability exemption for drug manufacturers was inserted into the language, without the approval of the conference. According to reports, the President of the Senate simply walked over to the House side and inserted 40 pages into the bill. It amounted to a multi-billion dollar gift to drug companies.

Mr. Frist's liability exemption had been brought up during the conference process, but it was rejected - just like the Medicare legislation of 2003 had, in truth, been rejected by this House.

But in each case, Members of the Republican leadership wanted something that they couldn't get through the democratic process - and so they ignored that process.

By doing so, they did more than pass flawed legislation. They undermined our democracy itself.

This democracy is a system designed to prevent abuses like these from occurring, a system constructed and improved over two centuries so that bad legislation would be exposed and voted down.

If we profess to care about democracy, then the proof will be in the process.

M. Speaker, we must save the democratic process in this House.

The civility portion of the Democratic Rules Package before us today will prevent the abuses of recent years from happening again.

It will prohibit the speaker from holding open votes for longer than 15 minutes just so that an outcome can be changed.

Democracy is the art of compromise - not the art of coercion.

We are also going to insist that conference committees operate in an open and fair manner, and that House conferees sign final conference papers at one time and in one place. Never again will the esteemed members of this body, on either side of the aisle, be locked out of our democracy.

And this package prohibits the consideration of any conference report that has been altered after it was signed by conferees.

If a conference can't agree on a legislative provision, then it shouldn't be in the conference report. Period.

If the Members of this body believe in the power of their ideas, then there will be no need for tactics like those we have seen of late. An open, democratic, and civil process will promote good ideas and good legislation. And it will eliminate corruption and influence-peddling.

In this new Congress, and with this new Rules package, we are standing up for our system of government and the needs of the people it serves. Democrats are going to return civility, and common sense, to this body.

And I encourage everyone, on both sides of the aisle, to join us.

I yield back the balance of my time.